

FOREWORD:-

The author wishes to acknowledge the aid and helpful suggestions given him by Mr. A. Emirch, present Fire Chief of Baltimore City.

Also the interest shown by the Maryland Historical Society, who in its kind and courteous way showed the author how and where he might obtain useful data and information.

Charles Vinton Koons

5/7/28

THE EARLY HISTORY OF FIRE PROTECTION IN BALTIMORE CITY.

A paper on the early history of fire protection would take into account many and varied subjects, too numerous to write on at this time. I have taken one part--the fire companies, themselves. The subject of fire companies, themselves, would be too vast a subject to hope to cover in this short paper. Therefore, this thesis will deal with the Early History of Fire Protection in Baltimore City, as far as the records of the fire companies, up to and including the organization of the city's first department in 1858.

The first fire in Baltimore, of which I have been able to obtain an account, was one that occurred in a dwelling house occupied by Greenberg Dorsey and family. This occurred on March 6, 1749.

At this time, such a thing as a fire-engine or any kind of a machine for the extinguishing of fires, was unknown in this country. Every citizen kept a number of buckets which were marked with his name. These were taken to the fire by the owners, or set out so that a passer-by could take them to the scene of the fire. After the fire had been extinguished, the citizen's buckets, that had been used, were thrown on a lot and then the Town Crier lustily called out, "Hear ye, Oh! I pray ye, Lords and Masters claim your buckets". This usually brought all the boys out and a general scramble took place, in order to gather the rich people's buckets, so that they might gain a reward.

On July 16, 1763, a scheme of lottery was proposed to the public, for the purpose of raising the sum of FIVE HUNDRED AND TEN POUNDS, part of which was to be used in buying two fire-engines and a number of leather buckets. This scheme proved to be a failure.

During the year of 1763 the first fire company ever formed in Baltimore was organized and was called, "The Mechanical Fire Company". This company consisted of volunteers who had formed themselves into a social club, whose primary purpose was the prevention and extinguishing of fires. They used only the bucket line and when the fire became too hot, it was just watched to see that no other structure was damaged by its sparks.

At a meeting of the members of this company, in 1769, they were informed that the captain of a Dutch ship, (then lying in port), had brought over from Holland, and was willing to sell, a fire-engine. Certain members of the Mechanical Fire Company, aided by a generous subscription, purchased it for the sum of NINETY-NINE POUNDS, or TWO HUNDRED AND SIXTY-FOUR DOLLARS. This was the first machine used for the extinguishment of fires in Baltimore. It was christened the "Dutchman". The works of the "Dutchman" consisted of two pumps made out of sheet brass, two valves in the bottom of each pump for suction and forcing and two valves for air purposes, with one discharge pipe enclosed in an apartment, the seat of which was made of wood and the sides of copper, worked by a single beam or lines and mounted by means of small iron axles and wheels two feet in diameter.

Between 1769 and 1787 three other companies were formed. They were the Mercantile, Union and Friendship.

The members of these three companies and the members of the Mechanical Fire Company, on Saturday evening, March 17, 1787 met and --

RESOLVED, that this committee recommend to the inhabitants of this town, that they put lights in their windows in case of fire in the

night, not only near where the fire is, but generally throughout the town, for the convenience of those who are repairing to the fire.

RESOLVED, that it be recommended to every house-keeper, where one of the family does not belong to some fire company, to provide, as soon as possible, two good leather buckets, marked with the owner's name, and that they be sent to the place of fire immediately on the alarm being given.

RESOLVED, that each fire company appoint any number of their own company for lane men, who shall be distinguished by a white staff eight feet long, whose business it shall be to form lanes for the purpose of handling the water.

RESOLVED, that each fire company appoint any number of men of their company, for property men, who shall each be distinguished by having the crown of his hat painted white and whose business it shall be to take charge of property to be removed in time of fire.

On May 15, 1787 an act by the General Assembly obliged each householder to keep two leather buckets hung up near the door of his house, or pay a penalty of FIVE POUNDS: and the commissioners of the town were authorized to dig wells and erect pumps on the sides of the streets. These famous leather buckets, of which we hear so much were used to convey water to supply the engines, as fire plugs and hose were not then in use. The attachment of the early inhabitants to the leather buckets seems to have been nearly as great as that of the poet to, "The old oaken bucket that hung in the well", and if they were not regarded with quite so much sentiment they were certainly made to render as

valuable service. In those days there were few or no spectators at fires. Long lines of people were formed to "Hand along the buckets" and if the curious or idle attempted to pass by, the cry echoed along the line, "Fall in! Fall in!". Also at this time the companies started to meet together in the afternoons in order to try their engines and exercise themselves, that they might be better enabled to act in conjunction.

In the same year a bell was placed near the courthouse for the purpose of a fire-alarm.

In 1824 the Washington Hose Company purchased a lot of copper and tin riveted hose from A. Dialogue of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This was the first riveted hose ever used in Baltimore, for prior to this all hose used had been sewed.

By 1833 there were formed fifteen different volunteer organizations for the purpose of putting out fires. These different organizations had reached the point where they were getting in one another's way, due to the fact that there was no form of organization.

On November 18, 1833 a convention of delegates from the fire companies, Mechanical, Union, Friendship, Deptford, Liberty, Independent, Vigilant, New Market, Columbian, First Baltimore, Patapsco and Howard, was held in the old City Hall. This meeting was for the purpose of organizing a fire department and adopting resolutions to be submitted to the several fire companies. The fifteen companies then in the city, in accordance with the recommendation of the convention of delegates, each appointed 7 delegates, who met on the 20th of January 1834, at the Old

City Hall and organized the Baltimore United Fire Department. They elected their officers two nights later. The form of the volunteer Fire Department differed so much from any other city in the Union that it became noted for its efficiency all over the country.

During the December session of the City Council, in 1833, an act was passed to incorporate the Baltimore United Fire Department. By this act this body of volunteers was incorporated and had the power to sue, to be sued and to invest money donated to them. Each fire company was to appoint seven delegates yearly for the convention. The first delegate of the seven was a member of the "Board of Select Delegates". The board corresponded to a board of directors.

The fire department then assumed the proportions of a fraternal organization (similar to the Masons). They guarded their membership against those whose character was unfit. The rivalry between the different fire companies now became very great, parades, picnics, oyster roasts and other such things were held. Here the different companies vied with each other for athletic supremacy. This striving for supremacy became so great that numerous riots were caused by the firemen.

The first steam engine ever owned in Baltimore City was one bought by the First Baltimore Hose Company. It arrived in Baltimore on the morning of May 18, 1858, from Philadelphia, where it had been built. It was moved to Monument Square where it was exhibited. Such was the eagerness to see it, that it was found necessary to form a space by means of stretched ropes and a squad of police were detailed to keep the crowd from intruding beyond the ropes. The smoke-stack of this engine worked on a hinge so that it could enter the engine house without ob-

struction. Accompanying the engine, there was a two wheel vehicle to be used as a tender, in which to carry the fuel, pipes and sucking sleeves. In response to an alarm of fire, this vehicle was hooked on behind the engine. This engine was called the "Alpha". There seems to be no record of when the hook and ladder trucks came into existence, but for many years fire companies were equipped with ladders and hook.

The establishment of a municipal fire-alarm telegraph was suggested by the "Sun", in 1854 and its introduction was urged upon the City Council; but like many other valuable suggestions it passed unheeded for a time. On March 11, 1857 a petition containing several thousand signatures was presented to the first branch of the City Council, praying the erection of a fire-alarm telegraph in the city. In June 1858 the mayor and the City Council adopted the use of the fire-alarm telegraph. On Monday, June the 27th, the first operation of this fire-alarm telegraph took place. It was a test of the telegraphic wires in ringing the bell connected with the engine house of the "Alpha". This proved very successful and the entire line was completed on June 30th.

On an afternoon, July 3, 1858, a fire broke out in a large warehouse. Due to there being a quantity of straw and other combustible material in the building, the fire assumed gigantic proportions before the fire company arrived on the scene. Several hand engines started work before the "Alpha" arrived. As soon as the engine was put to work the effect was perceptible. "The Baltimore Sun" the next morning in commenting on the fire said, "The work of yesterday conclusively shows that, with a few more steam engines, properly managed, no fear of an

extensive fire need be entertained". Another thing of note is that this was the first fire where ropes were used to keep the crowd from obstructing the firemen at their work.

The Baltimore United Fire Department was composed of, at this time (1858), twenty-two companies, three steam engines, seventeen hand engines, two hook and ladder trucks, one thousand active members and about two thousand honorary or contributing members, (a number of whom were among the best members of society).

This system was voluntary and the organization was supported by an annual appropriation of EIGHT HUNDRED DOLLARS to each company and by contributions from insurance companies business men and others.

The following are the names of fire companies that were formed in Baltimore, prior to 1859:-

Mechanical-1763, Mercantile-unknown, Union-1782, Friendship-1785, Deptford-1792, Commercial-1792, Liberty-1794, Reliance-1799, Federal-1799, Republic-1801, Vigilant-1804, New Market-1805, Columbian-1805, Franklin-1807, First Baltimore Hose-1810, United-1810, Fells Point-1810, Washington Hose-1815, Franklin-1815, Patapsco-1822, Howard-1830, Watchman-1840, Lafayette-1842, Monumental Hose-1851, Pioneer Hook and Ladder Company-1851, Western Hose-1852, Mt. Vernon Hook and Ladder Company-1853, Monumental Hose-1855, United States Hose-1856.

The matter of a paid fire department was brought before the Council in 1858, by a message from Honorable Thomas Swann, at that time mayor of the city.

It was evident that the public interest would not admit to

further postponement of the work of reform. Accordingly, the Council passed a resolution providing for a commission consisting of nine members, two to be appointed by the mayor and three by the president of the Baltimore United Fire Department. The commission was requested to draft an ordinance providing for a new department, with the proper number of companies, men, officers and equipment. This commission submitted two reports:- That of the majority suggested that the hostler and engineer of each company should be paid and all the other members should still be volunteers. That of the minority urged that every man should be compensated for his labor.

The reports of the commission were referred to the Joint Standing Committee on Fire Companies, who decided against the minority and in favor of the majority report and an ordinance was proposed and passed accordingly. When this bill came before Mayor Swann, he vetoed it, on the ground that the demand was not for an admixture of paid volunteer system, but for a full paid system.

Meanwhile the volunteers were not idle, many of them were attached to their companies by the strongest ties of sentiment and were prepared to fight to the last for the maintenance of the system so endeared to them. However, the time had passed for compromise and the old plan was doomed to total abolition.

The First Branch of the City Council, on Tuesday, December 7, 1858, passed the ordinance to establish a paid fire department and on Wednesday, December 8th, it passed the Second Branch. On December 10th it was approved by Mayor Swann and the days of the volunteer fire

department was a thing of the past.

The first appointed Fire Commissioners were Messrs. W.H. Stran, J. Cushing, J. T. Morris, William H. Quincy and John W. Loane. Mr. Charles T. Hollaway was appointed Chief Engineer.

Immediately the apparatus of the different fire companies were examined and the necessary new equipment was purchased. At this time there were only three steam engines in the department. During the course of a year four more steam engines and one hook and ladder were purchased.

The first alarm after the forming of the paid department occurred on the 23rd of February. The new department answered very promptly. The paid service was on its way to the heights of glory it has assumed today.

BIBLIOGRAPHY.

1. The Fireman's Record.....J. A. Cassedy
2. Files of Records of Baltimore Fire Department
3. Records of Baltimore Historical Society
4. Early History of BaltimoreJ. T. Scharf
5. History of Fire Department of BaltimoreC. H. Forrest
6. Baltimore Sun Files
7. Chronicles of Baltimore.....J. T. Scharf
8. The Fireman.....David Dana